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Connecting The Language Arts Core Curriculum to the Global Economy

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Connecting the Language Arts Core Curriculum to the Global Economy

As the United States has connected with the global economy, many question our responsibility to developing nations. Topics on social justice have emerged in classrooms from Pre-K to the university level. Many people believe, as we do, that educators must move beyond the testing culture and minimal standards to motivate our students to think deeply about how they, as United States citizens, impact others within the global economy.

This summer, we attended a social justice trip for teachers, sponsored by the non-profit organization Friends Beyond Borders. All of us had travelled with this group before and were committed to connecting our students via our lesson plans to the world. As a group, we taught various grades and subjects in the United States. We three found ourselves chatting about our commitment to Fair Trade: Liz as an English teacher, Tiffany as an economics teacher, and Ginger as a teen committed to the fair trade movement, who has taught workshops to scouts and youth groups. Together, we generated a concrete lesson plan on fair trade and persuasive writing that would readily work at either the middle school or high school level.

Several essential questions emerged: 1. What is Fair Trade? 2. What are the benefits of Fair Trade products to the workers? 3. How bad are conditions in non-Fair Trade factories and farms? 4. How can consumers learn what products are Fair Trade? 5. How can consumers motivate stores to sell more Fair Trade products? 6. What are the detractions regarding Fair Trade?

Many students (and adults) do not know what fair trade is. Ginger had presented on fair trade to earn her Girl Scout Silver Award; she began each presentation for younger Girl Scouts with a simple questionnaire. Using that model, we created an anticipation guide on Fair Trade (see appendix). After the students complete the anticipation guide alone, students should discuss their answers and argue their logic. Responses vary widely. For example, Ginger, who worked primarily with suburban middle school students, found many of them said, “yes” to “Kids Can

Make a Difference” but were unable to explain why or when. Conversely, Tiffany found her population of GED students were far more skeptical about whether people their age could generate change.

The discussion should be a transition to the Prezi on fair trade, so it is fine if students do not entirely understand the topic yet. After the discourse based on the anticipation guide, introduce the term fair trade and show the Prezi on fair trade, which is accessed via Internet: <http://prezi.com/yyumgs8v61le/fair-trade-around-the-world/>. (It’s ideal to have it already loaded on your computer before the class starts). The Prezi, a cloud-based presentation method, has two short You Tubes imbedded in it; the whole presentation is about 5 minutes long.

After the Prezi, teachers should identify some terms: fair trade, developing nations, sustainability and exploitation. This is an opportunity to check with the students’ understanding of the Prezi: What can we Americans, especially teens, do to help exploited workers? As the Prezi suggests, even buying fairly traded iced tea or coffee can impact the market. Today, even chains like Target stock fair trade teas and coffees. Ask the students where they have seen fair trade products.

Next students should reflect on their favorite stores or product lines, and if they have fair trade products. If students are not sure if the goods are fair trade, they can investigate them on the Internet. Simply typing the store name or product in Google with the added words “Fair Trade” elicits many articles and web sites. For example, typing in “Victoria Secret Fair Trade” generates many articles on a controversy regarding the company (Liggett). Students will naturally be questioning themselves: who sells fairly traded products? Could it be common stores like Target or Dunkin Donuts? (Citron-Fink). Further, what percentage of the goods sold by these stores are fair trade products?

As students reflect on their research, they should identify to whom they would like to question. If they pick a store like Forever 21 or

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Sports Authority, they can readily find the head quarters' and CEO's address on the Internet. Local stores' managers or owners can also be identified via basic internet searches. Students could alternatively select a celebrity such as Eli Manning or Beyonce; their addresses would be found with their team or label. The question is: would the store or the celebrity consider selling or representing a fair trade line of clothing or food? Would they speak up for exploited workers?

The next step involves the writing component. Students should review how to write a persuasive letter. One key aspect, whether writing for the state test or for a general letter, is to focus. Students should state the general idea and support it with detailed evidence. Facts can be researched via Internet or revisiting the Prezi. (Some sources are listed at the end of this article, including a review of model fair trade factory where all three of us visited.) Other parts to review include the salutation, the closing, the format of the letter. Compositional risk earns top scores on state tests, so this is an opportunity to discuss how to add style to a basic persuasive letter. Certainly students should include an address (email or land) so that the store or celebrity can respond. Some teachers may feel more comfortable using a template to prompt the letter writing; one is included in the appendix.

Liz modeled this assignment herself and wrote to the CEO of Victoria Secret, stating that she felt conflicted: she and her daughters liked the merchandise but they felt uncomfortable buying non-fair trade clothing. She received a personal letter, stating that Victoria Secret has begun buying more fairly traded cotton. Liz had also suggested that the store start a fair trade line, possibly in PINK, that included the fair trade label. If more people wrote to the store, maybe they would. Stores and corporations are more likely to change to fair trade because their customers will buy those goods, not because it's the moral thing to do. After all, we are a capitalistic society.

There is certainly the possibility that some students may not want to write about fair trade. If not, they could write a letter to the teacher explaining why they disagree with the fair trade movement, even why they feel it cannot create change. Students must rely on sources, such as "Fair Trade?" listed in the works cited page, which includes the pros and cons of the Fair Trade

model. However, It has been our experience that few adolescents reject the idea of fair trade. Instead, they feel bad but powerless. Clearly, they don't like buying things that may support unsafe factories (like the one that collapsed in Bangladesh) (Manik and Yardley) (Blair) or unfair labor conditions (where workers' legs swell so much that they cannot walk due to such long hours) (Duhigg and Barboza). But they wonder: what can an adolescent do? It may not be much, but they can make a start by writing a letter.

A closing assignment should involve several components: documenting sources, reflection, and creativity. This will involve several parts, what some call a multi-genre research paper. The first step involves a reflection piece. Since Tiffany teaches economics at the high school level, her final assignment is lengthier and stresses economics, sustainability, and a materials society as well as fair trade. In Language Arts classrooms, where the focus is on persuasive writing skills, the culminating activity may be more creative, such as the multi-genre assignment Liz uses.

Multi-genre assignments involve multiple parts – they can be submitted on line via sites such as Edmodo, or they could be in paper form. This assignment would involve three parts: A reflection essay, a works cited page, a creative response and presentation. 1. Write a first-person, one-page reflection essay, revisiting the essential questions listed at the beginning of the article. Most importantly, students should address whether they intend to make changes in their shopping habits. At least two sources should be cited and discussed. 2. Include a works cited page, listing at least one article about fair trade as well as one web site about the company or celebrity addressed. 3. Write a poem or create an i-movie about fair trade.

The former could be entered into a fair trade sponsored poetry contest, the Divine Poetry Competition: (see works cited for latest winners). The students could write poems using the Divine Poetry Competition topic or about the subject from their research. Alternatively, they could make an i-movie or skit on any relevant topic ranging from Fair Trade cotton to abusive working conditions. This is a lighter approach to the topic, and relies less on specific citations and more on students revealing they understand the overall idea and can communicate their point of view. All students are graded on their

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presentations, including the poetry writers, who should read their poems aloud to the class. These presentations are often entertaining and moving. Some have even performed skits with sock puppets, which was both educational and entertaining.

Through generating research, letter writing, and poetry or movies about fair trade, the students may discover that even a small morsel of chocolate can reveal ugly truths as well as the

hopeful possibilities about the global economy and its work conditions. People mindlessly eat chocolate without reflecting on who picked the beans. But with a little research, students can taste more than the rich sweetness. In the words of 8 year-old Annabel Seville's award-winning poem "A Chocolate Hug": "There is Power in this chocolate/ Power to make happiness/ Strength from the sun's blazing rays/ Blessing the beans and the growers-/ Transforming lives."

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More on Friends Beyond Borders:

Go to: <http://friendsbeyondborders.net/>. There will be regular updates about summer trips for teachers and teens.

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Anticipation Guide on Fair Trade Unit	TEMPLATE for Persuasive Letter on Fair Trade
<p>Even if you are unsure, choose A (agree) or D (disagree). Be prepared to argue your logic.</p>	<p>NAME, CEO COMPANY ADDRESS</p>
<p>Circle either A (agree) or D (disagree).</p>	<p>Dear --- Date</p>
<p>A or D Kids can make a difference.</p>	<p>I am a frequent -- shopper and enjoy much of your merchandise, including ---. (Discuss briefly why you like the store/products).</p>
<p>A or D powerful people Protesting never works; the don't care what protestors have to say.</p>	<p>However, I recently learned about fair trade and worry that your store does not support fair trade practices. ** Why is this important to you? Explain.</p>
<p>A or D workers in What you buy or don't buy impacts other countries.</p>	<p>I hope you will consider creating a fair trade line. Why not try it? Many teens are like me who are mindful of where a product is made and who made it. _____ store has some Fair Trade lines – why can't _____? Please let me know if you will consider this. I would like to continue to shop at _____ but I would like to be proud of my shopping choices.</p>
<p>A or D need much People in developing nations don't money to live comfortably.</p>	<p>Thank you for your consideration.</p>
<p>A or D It's better to have 4 cheap items that are pretty nice than 1 item that you love and feel good about purchasing.</p>	<p>Sincerely, Your Name Add your address</p>
	<p>Check list: ** Include names & addresses – both yours and addressee ** Write in a formal, respectful tone ** Clarify why your opinion should be valued (you shop regularly or are a big fan) ** Include facts ** Add some snazzy style, maybe a simile or alliteration.</p>

Liz deBeer, MA., Ed.D., has taught college courses at both Rutgers and Middlesex County and most recently has taught high school English at Point Pleasant Beach High School. She was a 2011 winner of the NJCTE Outstanding English Language Arts Educator.

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Sunset Park, Brooklyn, NY. She is entering her 11th year of teaching in NYC public schools where she's taught special education, American history, global history, health and economics. In the 2012-13 school year she traveled to Rwanda through a Fund for Teachers grant to work with women artisan collectives and learn about their fair trade alliance.

Ginger Wardell is currently a junior at Rumson-Fair Haven High School, Rumson, NJ. She writes a blog on fair trade.



Photo by Caitlin Laufer